

Affect and the Body in Melville's "Bartleby" and Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim*

Patti Luedecke

Introduction

Mariko Tamaki, storywriter for *Skim* (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008), talking about the experiences that inspire her writing, says, "I always thought I was an ugly Canadian" (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2005:4). Although this statement may seem an odd juxtaposition, for how can a Canadian feel ugly or beautiful, Tamaki's words may be opening a new space and language from which to discuss the nation: the body and its emotions. In her discussion of the nation in Nathaniel Hawthorne's work, Lauren Berlant argues that nations in fact do make us feel: "Ending the essay as 'a citizen of somewhere else,' he [Hawthorne] acts out how it *feels* to be a citizen by constructing 'America' as a domestic, and yet a strange and foreign place" (1991:3). But ugliness and shame are not only felt by the citizen, they can also be directed towards the nation. Berlant notes that:

Insofar as the production of "citizens" by "nations" requires symbolic and practical orchestration of a public mentality, Hawthorne, [and perhaps we can begin to think about other writers who do this as well] critiques and counters the hegemonizing strategies and privileges of "official" national identity. He uses the fact of the popular reframing of official material to *humiliate* textually the fictive self-presence of the federal system (1991:7) [My emphasis].

If the nation relies upon internalized affects to maintain the citizen, perhaps shame and humiliation can be turned back upon constructions of the nation.

In her exploration of the critical possibilities opened up by *Ugly Feelings* (Ngai, 2005:3-4), Sianne Ngai relies not on Hawthorne, but on Melville and "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (Melville, 1853) to illustrate her ideas. Throughout her essay, Ngai calls Bartleby forth from behind his partition screen and is much more successful than his lawyer employer in putting him to work. Concluding her introduction, she writes: "Bartleby will preside over our final examination of the challenge that disgust's aesthetic of the intolerable poses...for all his insistent negativity and ability to make his social invisibility as obtrusively visible" (2005:36). I want to argue that it is Bartleby's body that refuses to be incorporated into the culture, particularly through his rejection of consumption, a body that remains obtrusively visible *because* of its ghostliness and lack of corporeality.

Using Ngai both for her thinking on affect and as a model for her method

of employing Bartleby throughout her discussion, I want to flesh out Bartleby to come to a greater understanding of Ngai, and then employ both Ngai and Bartleby to think about affect and the body in Jillian Tamaki and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim*. Ngai's method is on display in her juxtaposition of a collection of poems by Bruce Andrews, entitled *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up, or Social Romanticism* (1992), and "Bartleby": "There is a sense, then, in which *Shut Up* and "Bartleby" -- despite the fact that they are worlds apart -- share a common goal: both activate an ugly feeling to disclose the limits of the 'social disattendability' that enables friendly as well as disdainful tolerance for an object perceived as so unthreatening as to be barely perceptible at all" (Ngai, 2005:349). Although Bartleby insists on haunting the stairways of the lawyer's office building, Ngai can make him travel and visit other texts where invisibility is insistently visible just at the point when society would *prefer not to have to notice it*, and would rather not attend to it. For example when the "Asian American is forced into the position of the model minority" (2005:93), Bartleby can show how such invisibility can be demandingly visible. Ngai compares Bartleby and the stereotype of the affectless Asian outright: "An American racial stereotype -- that of the Asian as silent, inexpressive, and like Bartleby, emotionally inscrutable" (2005:93).

I want, then, to consider the role of the body and consumption in *Skim* and the ways in which there may be a politics of ugly feelings that novel makes possible by looking at the discourse surrounding the teenage body and emotion and the portrayal of food and metaphors of food employed in the graphic novel. Following this discussion of the body and consumption in both texts will be a consideration of "animatedness" in "Bartleby" and *Skim*. I want to talk about the potential that the graphic novel, as a form, has to animate, and to explore whether or not there is a dramatic, or, perhaps, graphic, irony in making a comic book about negative affects, about inaction, and about seeming indifference: a kind of affectlessness shared by Kim and Bartleby, the one who "Prefers Not to" and the other who identifies herself as *Skim*, "Because I'm not" (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:27).¹ Ngai writes that, "we can speak about someone's being 'animated' by a passion like anger, but not about an objectless mood like nostalgia or depression, which tend to have a de-animating effect on those affected by them" (Ngai, 2005:31). Given that so much of *Skim* is about depression, I want to consider the relationship between form and content and the relationship of animatedness to the graphic novel.

The Body and Identity

First, however, I would like to consider the way these two characters are somewhat related in their articulations of identity, which I hope will help in thinking about them together. In an interview, Mariko Tamaki diagnoses the

culture's insistence upon positive identifications. She says, "Other people make me Japanese: some people really badly want you to come from 'outside' -- for example, by guessing where a non-Caucasian is 'from' -- 'like they feel really happy that they've pointed out how different you are'" (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2005:4). The need to positively "ID" subjects that Mariko points to can perhaps shed some light on the way in which Bartleby and Kim, two totally different characters, I know, can be juxtaposed. Using Ngai, I would like to argue that they are similar in that their diagnostic power remains in their negatively couched expressions of identification (Bartleby's "I prefer not to" and Kim's "Because I'm not") and the way their bodies, the one wan the other self-conscious, hover around these negations. Elizabeth Hardwick, in her essay, "Bartleby in Manhattan" (1983) links Bartleby's body to his identity:

Bartleby's 'I' is of such a completeness that it does not require support. He possesses his 'I' as if it were a visible part of the body, the way ordinary men possess a thumb. In his sentence he encloses his past, present, and future, himself, all there is. His statement is positive indeed and the *not* is less important than the 'I,' because the 'not' refers to the presence of others, to the world, inevitably making suggestions the 'I' does not encompass (Hardwick, 2002: 259).

Although I agree with Hardwick that Bartleby's identification is as positive as it is negative, I also think that Bartleby is as constituted by what he is not. His "I" is not more important than his "not" because he defines himself through his rejection of the presence of others, of the world, of Wall Street. The main point that Hardwick gets at, though, is that Bartleby's identity is bound up in his body and I think that this is because it is his body that is intrusively invisible. Later on in the essay she notes that, when the lawyer asks Bartleby what he is doing in the offices and he replies that he is sitting on the banister, "the lawyer had meant to ask what will you do with your life, where will you go, and not, where is your body at this moment. But with Bartleby body and statement are one" (2002:263).

In *Skim*, the body and identity are perhaps more complexly related but nonetheless echo Bartleby. At the beginning of the graphic novel, we find ourselves in the diary of Kimberly Keiko Cameron, nicknamed Skim. She invites us to look over her shoulder into her diary (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:7-8), and to look at blurry Polaroid pictures of her broken arm. A few pages into the novel, we are confronted with a distorted picture of a fragment of her body like her fragmented name. The novel shows how bound teenage identity really is in the body as both Kim and Katie Matthews, a fellow student, write on and scratch out what other people write on their casts (2008:136). The opening page of the novel lets us, the readers of the diary, know that "Today Lisa said, 'Everyone thinks they are unique.' That is not unique!!" (2008:5). Somewhat ironically, Kim regrets that she could not get a black cast and that she had to get "regular white instead" (2008:8). Perhaps she felt that a black cast would

have better articulated her identity as a Wiccan, something that does make her unique. Having broken her arm, Kim has to learn to write with her left hand. The reader gets a close-up of her writing in her schoolbook and what she writes is “Kim Cameron Kim Cameron Kim Cameron” (2008:8). On one level, of course, this is just a teenager learning to write with her left hand, having broken her writing arm. On the other hand, it embodies what Ngai refers to, rather uncannily, as the tensor, though not the bandage type: “Lyotard’s favorite example of the tensor is the proper name, a form that reminds us that while all signs are prone to semantic pluralization and slippage, not all are prone to this equally; some, like *Alamo* or *Lipton Tea*, have an ‘intensity’ that makes them more resistant -- if only slightly -- to polysemous voyages” (Ngai, 2005:350). The repetition of Kim’s real name seems to point to a kind of insistence on her unique identity bound up in her body and an awareness of her body through its breaking. By repeating it, she tries to make her name not “slip” as her hand does on the page. Ms. Archer, her teacher with whom she is soon to become romantically involved, asks her, “Why do the students call you Skim?” and she replies “Because I’m not” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:27). Kim’s negative identification can be seen as powerful in that it forces away the nastiness of a name that binds her identity to her body. Perhaps her response is an example of what Ngai call’s Bartleby’s insistently visible invisibility: in that Kim is visible, “I am” and, invisible “not,” both present and not. Later we learn that Kim had been to a traumatic birthday party that some girls had ruthlessly kicked her and a Vietnamese girl, Hein, out of. Kim describes herself and Hein as the only “non-figure skaters” (2008:83). This can be seen as an example of the diagnostic possibilities of negatively defining identity in relation to the body because it points to the ridiculousness of everyone having to be a figure-skater, of having to have the same body, and the body as being the main marker of teenage identity.² In the frame in which Kim and Archer have this defining discussion, we see only the tops of Kim’s and Ms. Archer’s heads underscoring the flight from the corporeal. Next, in the frame in which Ms. Archer says, “I’ll assume you prefer Kim” (2008:27), we see only their bodies and Archer tapping Kim’s cast, realigning Kim’s identity a bit more comfortably in her body. Throughout the novel, the cast becomes a reminder of the way teenage identity is so closely linked to the body. As Archer and Kim become more intimate, Archer holds her cast (2008:31). In fact, Kim’s odd reluctance to throw away her cast, which she fishes out of the garbage, underscores how her identity remains very situated in her body, even though, as her mom says, “it’s a bit smelly” (2008:123). I hope that “Bartleby” can illuminate *Skim* at the juncture of negatively identifying the self in relation to the body. And I hope it can do this in a way that maintains the visibility of the semantically loaded body: in “Bartleby” in terms of class, and in *Skim* in terms of gender, race and, teenage anxiety, as a way of diagnosing something about the culture.

Bartleby's Body

The lawyer, who narrates "Bartleby" opens his account of Bartleby and his tenure in his offices with a nod to Bartleby's slipperiness and his own inability to recount his story: "While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of the sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist, for a full satisfactory biography of this man" (Melville, 1952:3). Before we are even introduced to Bartleby we get a feeling of dissatisfaction. Perhaps the lack of materials the lawyer refers to can be read as the lack of materiality that Bartleby's body insists on in the story, which I want to argue is the central place of what Ngai calls his "powerful powerlessness" (Ngai, 2005:2), even if it is only a power to create dissatisfaction. The description of the offices in which the lawyer conducts "snug business among rich men's bonds" (Melville, 1952:4) is described as claustrophobic and constricting. And the lawyer's euphemistic description seems to make it all the more suffocating: "My windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window-panes" (1952:5). By describing even the sootiness of the brick wall in such mock-heroic language, Melville makes the reader intimately aware of our surroundings in order that we may understand the place that Bartleby is to occupy, the place where his body is going to reside for the story. Knowing what we know of the lawyer, that he is a bit of a fool who can't see a dirty brick wall for what it is, the reader is led to suspect that only someone closely familiar with the offices, someone who would be living there would have to confront its filthiness intimately, namely Bartleby. As Leo Marx notes in his essay, "Melville's Parable of the Walls" (1953), Melville's subtitle, "A Story of Wall Street," is a pun: "As Melville describes the street, it literally becomes a walled street" (Marx, 2002:241). He writes: "notice that of all the people in the office Bartleby is in the best position to make a close scrutiny of the wall" (2002:243). I think that the walls are not only a pun and a metaphor for social isolation, but also a kind of hyperbole, given what we learn of Bartleby's slight and frail body. The walls are overkill and indeed signify Bartleby's death as Marx notes they are described as "'the dead brick wall'" and Bartleby as in "'a dead-wall revery'" (2002:245). For all of the heavy-handed rhetoric of the lawyer and the stern walls of the offices that are to contain Bartleby, Bartleby slips out of the narrative and leaves the reader, and the lawyer, with a sense of dissatisfaction.

Because the lawyer's current assistants are such slaves to their emotions, such exaggerations of affect, the lawyer seeks additional help and in many ways gets what he wishes for in Bartleby. The problem, however, is that Bartleby is *so* affectless, that his passive refusals to work are all the more infuriating to the lawyer. Upon Bartleby's mild refusal, "I prefer not to" (Melville,

1952:13), to the lawyer's request that he aid him, the lawyer claims that "had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him" (1952:13). Bartleby's affectlessness is manifest in his pale and wan body. The first we learn of Bartleby is that he is a "motionless" young man: "I can see that figure now," the lawyer writes, "--pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby" (1952:11). That Bartleby's respectability evokes pity, and that somehow he is neatly forlorn, mixes emotions and bodily appearance together to the unusual effect of not really describing a body, or a person, at all. Perhaps the irony here is that we cannot see Bartleby from this description. Indeed, we can barely make out his figure even if the lawyer can. And what is even more comical is that the first thing that the lawyer does after hiring him is to remove Bartleby's body from his sight by partitioning his workspace off with a high folding screen. Everything we know of Bartleby is paleness; he even writes "palely" (1952:12). He is all mildness and his refusal to work is much more forceful than the body from which it is issued: "Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, 'I would prefer not to'" (1952:13) and then his body "gently disappeared behind the screen" (1952:14). Bartleby's mild disappearances, his sliding behind the screen easily, heighten the readers' sense of his wan body, his lack of corporeality. Yet it is precisely his insistent corporeality, the seat of his lack of emotion, his emotional illegibility (Ngai, 2005:32), that makes him so aggravating to the lawyer: "Was there any other thing in which I could procure myself to be ignominiously repulsed by this lean penniless wight -- my hired clerk" (Melville, 1952:19), the lawyer exclaims. Bartleby's lack of body and emotion raise feelings of disgust in the lawyer.

This power to disgust is all the more potent, because Bartleby lacks a sense of present-body with which one could be disgusted. When the lawyer stops in at his offices one Sunday, and finds that Bartleby has been living there, we see Bartleby only as a ghost:

Luckily I had the key with me; but upon applying it to the lock, I found it resisted by something inserted from the inside. Quite surprised, I called out; when to my consternation a key was turned from within; and thrusting his lean visage at me, and holding the door ajar, the apparition of Bartleby appeared, in his shirt-sleeves, and otherwise in a strangely tattered deshabelle, saying quietly that he was sorry, but he was deeply engaged just then, and-preferred not admitting me at present (Melville, 1952:21).

From what we know of Bartleby, it is hardly likely that he would "thrust" anything of his body at anyone. This must be the lawyer's sense of disgust rising in his gorge. But what is disgusting about a ghost, an apparition? The lawyer articulates it himself; it is not Bartleby's lack of corporeality that bothers him, it is the little-that-remains, "his cadaverous triumph" (1952:32). Bartleby

the wight remains as a bodily presence that can't be removed, and this is what composes the central problem of the narrative. The fact that he cannot be ignored is his political incision into the culture. The lawyer fantasizes about how he might be rid of Bartleby's corpse thus:

Yes, as before I had prospectively assumed that Bartleby would depart, so now I might retrospectively assume that departed he was. In the legitimate carrying out of this assumption, I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air. Such a proceeding would in a singular degree have the appearance of a home-thrust. It was hardly possible that Bartleby could withstand such an application of the doctrine of assumptions (1952:32-33).

As Branka Arsic' notes in his book, *Passive Constitutions or 7 1/2 Times Bartleby* (2007), the lawyer's philosophy of assumption is a ruthless one:

For, as it becomes clear, a theoretician who advances Edwards's philosophy can either close his eyes to the reality that fails to adjust to his theory, behaving as if it were not there...; or, he can decide to manifest the performative force of his argument by 'adjusting' the other to himself, by violently 'applying' physical force to the body of the other. In other words, the attorney can 'successfully' apply the doctrine of assumption either by closing his eyes to the fact that Bartleby is in the office or by removing Bartleby's body from that office (Arsic', 2007:25).

The lawyer's "home-thrust" toward Bartleby's body is precisely what he imagined Bartleby doing when he opened the door. For the lawyer to want to walk against Bartleby as if he were air, is not only to want his offices back, but also his world view, that of the philosophy of assumption. It is Bartleby's wan body that remains in the space that shakes up his world. When the lawyer reaches his offices before work hours and knocks on the door, by accident with his knee, Bartleby's "voice came to me from within -- 'Not yet; I am occupied.' It was Bartleby" (Melville, 1952:32). The refrain, "it was Bartleby," was first encountered through the lawyer's description of Bartleby's body that mixed affects and appearance. Its recurrence now suggests a need to locate the "voice from within" in that body, a body that we can barely see. Arsic' notes of this scene that, "the 'ruse' of Bartleby's answer lies in its literality. Bartleby does not let the attorney into the space of the office because he is occupied, occupation here referring to the mode of his existence (to the way he is: 'I *am* occupied'). The room locked from the inside becomes the image of Bartleby's self. In the space in which there are no others, 'I am occupied' can only mean, 'I am occupied by myself,' and my door is closed now" (Arsic', 2007:20). That Bartleby's body takes up the whole of the offices makes the lawyer's fantasy of wanting to walk into him as though he were air seem comical, for, in fact, it is already as though he were air and this is exactly what is dissatisfying to the lawyer.

Ngai describes “Bartleby the Scrivener” as -- “a fiction in which the interpretive problems posed by an American office worker’s *affective* equivocality seem pointedly directed at the *political* equivocality of his unnervingly passive form of dissent” (Ngai, 2005:1). The lawyer cannot read Bartleby. He only knows that he is refusing to participate in the status quo. Ngai’s language shows that she considers the equivocality of ugly feelings as permeating the ether, perhaps as Bartleby permeates the ether of the office: “the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon the new set of feelings -- ones less powerful than the classical political passions, though perhaps more suited, *in their ambient, Bartlebyan, but still diagnostic nature*, for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen” (2005:5) [My emphasis]. It is not that Bartleby is in any way a “culture-jammer.” But he does, in his way, jam up the culture. His ghostly, cadaverous body sticks to Wall Street like glue as he prefers not to “quit” the lawyer’s offices. Much has been made of Bartleby’s passive resistance: his “success” in getting the lawyer to exclaim, “nothing so aggravates an earnest person as passive resistance” (Melville, 1952:17).³ But I think that Ngai’s reading of Bartleby is much more subtle, and, I think, that if Bartleby is diagnostic, his power stems from his wasted body and his affectless demeanour. The lawyer is ironically unaware that he articulates Bartleby’s power, what Ngai calls his obtrusive invisibility, as he wracks his brain trying to come up with the most appropriate measure to take with Bartleby who will not leave the offices:

Then something severe, something unusual must be done. What! Surely you will not have him collared by a constable, and commit his *innocent pallor* to the common jail [My emphasis]? And upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done? -- a vagrant, is he? What! He a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant, then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant [Original emphasis] (Melville, 1952:37).

Because the emphasis is in the original, there seems to be something in the negative here. It is that Bartleby “prefers not to” do one thing or another, and that because he is *not* a vagrant that the lawyer seeks to qualify him as one. It is Bartleby’s ghostly, cadaverous body, that remains, it is his “innocent pallor,” which the lawyer can’t get rid of, that keeps gumming up the works as he haunts the offices, that has diagnostic power. Ngai remarks that “what is intolerable about Bartleby is how paradoxically visible he makes his social invisibility” (Ngai, 2005:333). Perhaps just as Ngai posits that there is a space for ugly feelings in politics, maybe there is a space also created by negative identifications or inability to identify as well, as Bartleby slips the bounds of body, affect, and the law.

Skimming the Body

In some ways *Skim* deals with the opposite problem of “Bartleby” in that it is affect entirely *too* present in the body that generates ugly feelings. Kim rejects many feelings and their signifiers as disgusting for being insincere: “My dad signed my cast with an ugly happy face that I am scratching off” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:10), or “It is kind of brutal watching someone walk around with broken hearts on their hands” (2008:11). Kim mocks the body as a place to parade feelings that she believes are fake. When Katie Matthews is dumped by her boyfriend, John Reddear, Kim says, “I heard Ms. Archer in the staff room before lunch saying that Katie was an empty vessel waiting to be filled,” her best friend Lisa retorts, “Katie *is* an empty vessel waiting to be filled” (2008:12). Pointing to the hollowness of these feelings, the girls are

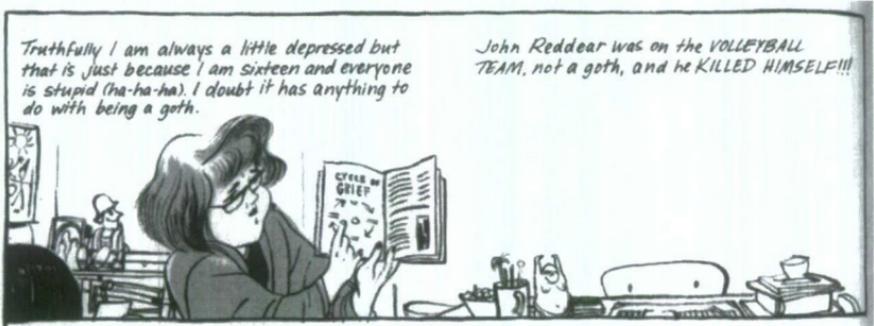


Fig. 1. Mrs. Hornet forces grief (*Skim* 22).

perhaps performing a criticism of ideology as Ngai describes it. In her chapter “Tone,” Ngai explores the thesis that: “There is a crucial similarity between the affective-aesthetic idea of tone, which is reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of the story, and the slippery zone between fake and real feelings, or free-floating and subjectively anchored feelings” (Ngai, 2005:41). She quotes Grossberg’s conclusion that, ““It is the affective investment which enables ideological relations to be internalized and, consequently, naturalized”” (2005:46-47). Katie Matthews is wearing her affective investment on her hands; in a way that makes Kim and Lisa uncomfortable, as she enacts a story of scorned teenage love. As Ngai explores Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, she concludes that, “confidence might be described as the ‘tone’ of capitalism itself” (2005:62). By this, she means that the affective tone cannot be owned as subjective emotion, but remains as an objective affect, though the confidence man’s trade in fake feelings is to sell it as “psychic property” (2005:61). The confidence man is able to run his con because “the very notion of feelings and emotions not really felt, but only imagined, is strange to most people” (2005:71). But this is not so for Kim. I think it can be argued that her refusal to

“go through the cycle of grief” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:22) or to participate in the “mosaic of mourning” (2008:23) constitutes her refusal to buy the fake feelings that the school and Girls Celebrate Life Club proffer (**Fig.1**).

Kim rebuffs the ideological investment that the culture has in the girls who are supposed to believe that those feelings are their own. In fact, not only does she laugh at these fake feelings, she rejects them in a much more corporeal way, with feelings of disgust. For example, in Mrs. Hornet’s, the guidance counselor’s office, Kim is really uncomfortable. Hornet is pressing close with her body, suffocating Kim with her smell of “baby powder deodorant.” This is as Kim doodles a bleeding heart under the word “fuck,” drawn with perspective lines to make it appear three dimensional, suggesting her repulsion. One panel has the reader looking at Mrs. Hornet holding up the chart of grief from Kim’s perspective (2008:22). But all we really focus on is the statue of an obese, naked body on Mrs. Hornet’s desk, so that we reject her message of forced grief with the power that a teenager rejects the appearance of what they consider to be a grotesque body. It is also no coincidence that Kim and Lisa have their conversation about the “mosaic of mourning” in the cafeteria at lunchtime: “Barf,” Kim exclaims, “Like Katie cares if we make her a card like, ‘Hi, you don’t know me, but I’m sorry your ex-boyfriend is dead’” (2008:23). Kim is repulsed by fake affects and uses the language of physical rejection through vomiting. At this point, it is not that Kim has inscrutable affects as Bartleby does, rather it is that she rejects the ideological tone of mourning with disgust. This disgust is an emotion that is truly her own, and has more political potential as Ngai notes: “The fact that the political right has more visibly and unhesitatingly instrumentalized its disgust throughout history does not mean, however, that the left lacks or should suppress its own -- particularly if the harmful and contaminating qualities it identifies as intolerable are those of racism, misogyny, or the militarism of political administration” (Ngai, 2005:339). Although the oppressive school environment is far from a “militarism of political administration,” I think that Kim’s rejection of its hawked ideology in the form of fake feelings is a political one. Ngai concludes that, “disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully” (2005:353). And Kim’s disgust with such fake feelings is diagnostic of the “discrimination” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:23) against “members of the ‘gothic’ culture” (2008:22) and the psychopathy of mandatory mourning -- what Lisa calls “a meaningless exercise of school paranoia” (2008:63).

Skim investigates how privacy of emotion disrupts the way public mourning attempts to hijack affect. Kim resents this hijacking because public mourning forecloses real mourning and the shame that comes with it. Although Kim may seem to her parents, as an affectless, or just moody teenager (to be discussed below), it is not that she has no emotions, only that she rejects the public trappings of woe. She does, in fact, feel very strong emotions; emotions

that reside in her body. When she is upset over her affair with her teacher who leaves the school, she thinks: "All day I was rubber. My eyes felt like bathtub plugs.... I tried to take up as little space as possible" (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:105). But I think Kim successfully negotiates her embodied feelings skimming the fat off superficial mainstream tonal affects. At the dreaded high-school dance, she observes: "This one song came on and everyone ran onto the dance floor and started dancing with their arms over their heads, waving at the ceiling. It's amazing how, when you don't feel something everyone else feels, it just looks like nothing. Like watching people dance to a song you don't like" (2008:128). Here, she extrapolates from the moment of experiencing people dancing. She understands it as metonymic of other times when she doesn't "feel" what everyone else supposedly feels, when she stands outside the culture. As Bartleby ruptures Wall Street by feeling nothing, by only mildly "preferring" this or that, Kim employs her own emotions, real, owned, embodied emotions when they are present and her own lack of public emotion to reject the ideologically "fake feelings" of society that would hijack her own, or dictate what she should feel as a subject. I wonder if we can say that Kim does what Berlant argues Hawthorne does by positioning himself outside the feeling nation? Does Kim "humiliate" the status quo?

Consuming Bartleby

Bartleby's body and Kim's body both articulate their rejection of the culture's mainstream in terms of consumption. The lawyer hires Bartleby for his calmness in hopes that he will quell the passions of his other copyists who are afflicted by indigestion and nervousness. He was, "glad to have among my *corps* of copyists a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers" (Melville, 1952:11) [My emphasis]. But Bartleby's body refuses to be consumed by the "corps" and does not fall in line. The story "Bartleby" is full, stuffed you might say, with images of consumption and food that the lawyer uses to tell his story: "At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long *famishing* for something to copy, he seemed to *gorge* himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion" (1952:12) [My emphasis]. Bartleby's wasted body is for Ngai a rejection of, and attraction to, the "capitalist life world": "This turning away is arguably the most polemical as well as most passive gesture of the copyist in 'Bartleby,' who disturbs also in his closely related refusal to consume anything" (Ngai, 2005:333). It is Bartleby's refusal to eat that is at the heart of both his disruptive body and his rejection of the status quo. The lawyer philosophizes about what sort of a man Bartleby is, based on what he eats. The lawyer concludes that Bartleby's body, weak though it may be, is as deflative of cultural clichés and norms,

such as, “you are what you eat,” as is his inscrutable character:

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian, then, but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called, because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now, what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect on Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none (Melville, 1952: 16-17).

Knowing the lawyer, the last sentence is probably not so much a joke for him as it is an expression of his marvel at Bartleby’s ability to repel exterior influence, given the extent to which he can control his body’s reactions to, and need for, foods. In his book *Melville’s Short Fiction, 1853-1856* (1977), William B. Dillingham draws a link between images of food and eating and images of money in “Bartleby.” I think it is necessary to quote both the story and Dillingham’s response to it. The section from the story that Dillingham critiques, in which the lawyer debates back and forth about whether to dismiss Bartleby, is as follows: “He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away chances are...he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience” (Melville, 1952:17). Here we see evidenced one half of Ngai’s “dialectic of repugnance and attraction” (Ngai, 2005:352), as Bartleby is both compelling and disgusting to the lawyer and this is what causes his fraught interior monologues. Dillingham concludes that, “In almost every episode either food or money becomes entangled in the lawyer’s attempt to deal with Bartleby” (Dillingham, 1977:28). Elsewhere he states that, “Again Melville associates money with food, contrasting the lawyer, who frequently talks literally and figuratively of eating and who in many places speaks of money or of trying to purchase something, with Bartleby, who has been fasting more than eating, saving more than buying” (1977:32). While Dillingham argues that the food metaphors comment upon the lawyer, “just as eating is an appropriate metaphor for the lawyer’s deep need to nourish his self-esteem, so ‘purchasing’ is an equally effective metaphor for the wrong way [in] which he goes about trying to feel good about himself” (1977:32), I think that the food metaphors have as much or more to do with Bartleby’s refusal to be consumed by the society, by the lawyer’s “corps” of clerks.

Ngai compares “Bartleby” to a collection of poems by Bruce Andrews, entitled *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up, or Social Romanticism*, a collection that she calls “insistently ugly” (Ngai, 2005:348): “both activate an ugly feeling to disclose the limits of the ‘social disattendability’” (2005:349).

Just as *Shut Up* aggravates the culture which tries not to be invested in that which affronts its sense of the beautiful (2005:348), so does Bartleby rub salt in the wound he opens in the lawyer's pity, such that though the lawyer moves offices, he cannot "quit" Bartleby any more than Bartleby prefers not to quit him. Bartleby's "preference" for one thing or another succeeds in its disinterestedness where the culture, and the lawyer, fail to be disinterested in him. Ngai relates this "social disattendability" to consumption: "This disattendability is the principle which Bartleby conspicuously...violates by adhering to it too well; in not eating, not striving, nor seeming to desire anything, Bartleby even seems to take *himself* as disattendable.... The disattendability itself comes to demand attention. We might say that for all his passivity, Bartleby is finding a way to make himself intolerable" (2005:337). It is because the lawyer, and society at large, could leave him to rot and starve, that they cannot. Bartleby's starved body and refusal to consume are too highly conspicuous. In fact, though the lawyer insists that "he is nothing to me" (Melville, 1952:39), it is his fear of "being exposed in the papers" (1952:40), that eventually spurs the lawyer to return to his former offices to convince Bartleby that he must leave. When the lawyer goes to visit Bartleby in prison, the Tombs, where the undead criminals haunt society, he feels he must get Bartleby to eat. He has a conversation with the "grub-man" who provides better fare than the staple prison diet to those whose friends have paid for it. The lawyer responds to this information: "'Well, then,' I said, slipping some silver into the grub-man's hands (for so they called him), 'I want you to give particular attention to my friend there; let him have the best dinner you can get'" (1952:44). But Bartleby would "prefer not to dine today" because of course it would "disagree" with him because he is "unused to dinners" (1952:44). That the lawyer asks the grub-man to pay special attention to Bartleby, just as the lawyer has, shows that Bartleby's lack of consumption is a matter of "attention" -- it is not "socially disattendable" and the grub-man is very alarmed at his refusal to eat.

What we know of Bartleby suggests that aside from his initial rapacious greed in copying, as though he were "famished," Bartleby spends most of his time *not* being a scrivener. The lawyer's insistence on titling his own reflections, and I think we can assume from the form of the first-person narrative that it is the lawyer who does the titling, that Bartleby is, not merely Bartleby, but "Bartleby the Scrivener" bumps up against the limits of "social disattendability." This, particularly, in that the lawyer clearly remains invested in Bartleby's incorporation into the mainstream, he *must* have an occupation. Ngai posits that because the object of disgust is also attractive, as Bartleby is most certainly an attractive figure, as anyone who has hated working in the modern world can attest, "disgust destroys not only 'aesthetical satisfaction' but the disinterestedness on which it depends" (Ngai, 2005:335). Bartleby however, succeeds in this, not only because he is an object of disgust and

desire, but also because he attains the disinterestedness that the lawyer and society wish to obtain in relation to him. He is not socially disattendant *because* he fails to attend the social. He succeeds in ignoring society, but it cannot ignore him. It remains attracted to the idea of consuming him and bringing him into the status quo.

Skim and Stomach Aches

Like “Bartleby,” *Skim* focuses on consumption as a battleground of sociality. Kim and Lisa overhear two girls talking in prayers who have swallowed the appropriate teenage excuse for anorexia in response to Katie’s hospitalization. Lisa sticks out her tongue as she hears them: “And it’s like, ever since then, I’m totally starving but I can’t eat. You know” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:45)? Graphically, the bubbles that surround these words are dotted lines, indicating that the girls are whispering because they shouldn’t be talking during prayers, but also that their thoughts are airy and insignificant, removed from the realm of solidity and the body. One girl says that when she heard that Katie was in the hospital: “it’s like my heart actually stopped beating” (2008:45). The girls at the school, as Kim calls it, “a fishbowl full of stupid” (2008:45), are totally incapable of understanding their bodies or their emotions. Yet they are forced to articulate them in the talk culture enforced by the school. Kim is totally revolted by one girl who offers, in a “self-love” exercise, “that unhappiness made her sad” (2008:60). She responds by writing that ignorance is what makes her sad. Although sadness is not necessarily as much an ugly feeling as it is an indiscriminate one, the girl’s expression resembles Ngai’s observation that “the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form of ‘I feel ashamed about feeling envious’...)” (Ngai, 2005:10). The girl’s double, or nonsensical, articulation that unhappiness makes her sad seems to point to a removal of pain from the body and an etherealization of emotion into a normative affect of tone: we *should* all feel sad about unhappiness. The girls’ feelings take no political risks as Ngai’s ugly feelings do.

Kim, however, articulates her emotions as residing in the body, heavily, particularly through figures of ingestion and consumption. When Kim goes to Ms. Archer’s house to drop off a drawing, and Ms. Archer invites her in, she tells us, “Everything I had to say is sticking to my insides” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:57). After a fight with Lisa in the girls’ bathroom, a highly corporeal space of teenage anxiety, Kim’s secret from Lisa about her feelings for Ms. Archer makes her stomach feel “like it’s popping, like an ice cube in a warm Pepsi” (2008:33). The turmoil of feelings in Kim’s stomach is finally not contained just in her body any more. When Kim and Katie encounter each

other for the first time, Katie asks Kim who drew the heart on her cast. Kim replies that it was Ms. Archer and thinks that, “when I say her name it feels like a candy that accidentally slipped out of my mouth” (2008:109). The difference between Kim’s metaphors of consumption to describe feeling and the other girls’, with their clichés of not being able to eat, or their complete inability to even name the cause of feeling except by defraying it onto another feeling such as unhappiness, is that Kim’s metaphors are vivid and unique and are much more able to articulate the consumption of emotions by the body.

Kim’s dinner conversation with her oppressively “open” father and his girlfriend who makes mugs printed with clichéd expressions of affect, such as “teen dram a queen,” or later, in her nightmare, “it’s a girl thing” (phrases which connote an excess of feeling but do not describe it) coincides with her fullness after eating. The fake affects, that is, the way in which the mugs expect proper teenage girl behavior to be an outpouring of emotions, full of drama, the intense close-up of her dad’s and his girlfriend’s faces as they force intimacy, is as sickening to Kim as over-eating (2008:66). Kim’s father’s insistence, every time she sees him, that “she can talk to him about anything, right” (2008:66), and her delayed answer: “I’m okay. I’m just... full” (2008:66) suggest that Kim is grossed out by excess affect. And yet, it isn’t that Kim doesn’t have emotions, or that she is disgusted by fake affects alone. In fact her subjective experience of love, her own felt emotion, is also repulsive at times. She looks at the scraps of food on the plate at the dinner table, the bones and the half-eaten chicken balls, and thinks: “I think I’m in love” (2008:66). The emotion of love remains in the body, but it fills Kim’s body in unexpected ways and does not match the ideological tone of “teen drama” as excess. Like the inscrutable scrivener, Kim is not emotionless, only affectless: that is, she refuses the affect of the dominant narrative of teenage drama. She concludes that the narrative is just rhetorical: “P.S. Today I dropped my paper mâché head in art class and everyone laughed. Thus confirming my suspicion that despite all this touchy-feely stuff, the girls at my school are still jerks” (2008:71). Yet the ideological tone of “touchy-feely” is policed by the authoritative teen drama queen in the school, Julie Peters, and when the Girls Celebrate Life club’s board is “vandalized,” her words expose her vehement adherence to the touchy-feely ideology: “You know, in some schools they send you to jail for this sort of thing” (2008:77). Ngai remarks of *The Confidence-Man* that in the novel, “the world is run by a feeling (confidence, trust) that no one in the novel can verify or publicly prove he possesses, even with the aid of tokens (money, vouchers, receipts) that are essentially abstractions of that unfelt ‘confidence’” (Ngai. 2005:69). When the Girls Celebrate Life Club’s board is trashed, anger is insisted upon by Julie Peters but felt by no one. The tokens of feeling plastered all over the club board or the girls who trail behind Katie Matthews are merely the trappings of unfelt joy and concern that no one feels. Ngai uses the language of currency to talk about *The Confidence-*

Man, but I think that her use of “ideological investments” (Ngai, 2005:46), and her claim that there is “feeling underwriting the system of fiduciary money” (2005:70), can be applied to *Skim*. I think it is fair to say that the novel points to the idea that feeling underwrites ideology. And this is why Julie Peters is so upset when that ideology gets challenged, when the board is vandalized, and when Katie wants to shirk her followers and leave the dance. Ngai writes that, “a public admission of not really ‘having’ the feeling, of being unable to isolate or locate it, either in oneself or in the fiduciary transactions that would seem to affirm its existence above all...raises the specter of a potential threat to the system itself” (2005:70).

The reason that Kim is in fact unique is that she is able to articulate not having the same feelings as everyone else. This is a rare accomplishment, because, as Ngai notes, in relation to the unfelt affect in art and *The Confidence-Man*, “the difficulty lies not in the ontological difference between real emotion and virtual emotion, but rather in their proximity” (2005:71). Kim seems to be able to tell these apart while everyone else around her cannot. She can discern between depression and mourning. Lisa rejects fake feelings, too. But while Lisa rejects the ideological tone’s investment in the body, manifested in the unfelt, clichéd metaphors of broken and stopped hearts and of celebration, Kim’s rejection of this ideology involves sifting out her own owned emotions, Ngai’s “psychic property” (2005:61), located in her body: “Dear diary, Today in prayers I was singing (sort of) ‘Joyful, Joyful,’ and I got a sick feeling” (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008:80). Here *Skim* places real and virtual emotion in close proximity, and Kim registers the difference in her body as a kind of excess that makes her stomach sick, but also makes her feeling sick as the song tries to get its hands on her emotions.

The singing of “Joyful, Joyful” is not only an insistence of tone through repetition, but is also an example of what Ngai calls, using Sylvan Tomkins’ work, “affective amplification” (Ngai, 2005:74). She writes that, “affective amplification does not simply turn up the volume on what is already there, but points to the presence of something ‘separate’” (2005:74). She quotes Tomkins and then goes on to make her own statement in relation to *The Confidence-Man*:

“Scenes are magnified not by repetition, but by repetition with a *difference*.... Sheer repetition of experience characteristically evokes adaptation, which attenuates, rather than magnifies, the connected scenes” (EA, 325). Returning to Tomkins’ own analogy between electronic and affective amplification, the “increase of gain” of the unnamed element, defined here only as that which is not signal, reveals difference in the form of an unexpected excess: something akin to the noisy interference the parasitical confidence-man introduces into his fiduciary transactions in order to disclose the illusory character of the feeling that has made them possible (2005:74).

What I take from Ngai's discussion of Tomkins' affective amplification is that the confidence-man's attempts to sell confidence is an attempt to amplify the feeling. However, instead, what he produces is not more confidence, louder confidence, but a kind of static that points to something outside the feeling, something different, an excess that shows that the system relies on confidence in order to function. I think these ideas can be applied to *Skim* because Kim sings "Joyful, Joyful," a song that is not only repetitive in its performance because it is part of the repertoire of school hymns, and in that it reproduces a certain kind of subject, one who is "joyful" about Christ, but also simply in its title, "Joyful, Joyful." Quite literally, this is an affective amplification, in that it is repeated and sung aloud. But more subtly, I think the novel articulates the excess of this amplification felt in Kim's stomach as it points to the illusion of joy, as Melville's work pointed to the illusion of confidence. Ngai calls this a feedback: "the fiduciary transactions automatically feedback, producing a noise that indicates not so much a glitch in the system as the way in which the system requires each transaction to 'place the [real feeling] farther out of reach'" (2005:76). I think the song can be read in this way, because it points to the way in which tone insists, repetitively, upon adherence to its ideology. However, by foregrounding this insistence through repetition, "Joyful, Joyful" exposes the normalizing force of that insistence and reveals just how little the subject actually feels what it insists it must. Therefore, the song places true joy for Kim "even further out of reach" (2005:76). Yet the excess also remains too close. The difference between what Kim sings she feels, "sort of," and what she actually feels resides in her body, and her "sick feeling" is diagnostic in its powerful powerlessness because, although she is forced to swallow this excess, her disgust with it points to how problematic it would be to swallow the fake joy wholeheartedly.

Ngai's Animatedness

I would now like to consider the relationship between affect and animatedness in "Bartleby" and in *Skim*. In her discussion of animatedness, Ngai concludes that modernist film underscores the passivity of the subject in that in the "ambiguous interplay between agitated things and deactivated persons, one could argue that what early animation technology foregrounds most is the increasingly ambiguous status of human agency in a Fordist era. . . . One of the most basic ways in which affect becomes socially recognizable in the age of mechanical reproducibility: as a kind of. . . 'animatedness'" (Ngai, 2005:91). Here, I hope to have a discussion of the invisibility of affect in Bartleby and animatedness as animation in *Skim* to see if there are some parallels at work around this issue. Scott McCloud (1993) uses McLuhan to demonstrate how the "realm of the senses" and the "realm of the concept" are

at play in comics. He notes that, for example, a car becomes an extension of the human body so that when a driver gets hit, they will probably say, ““Hey! He hit me!!””, rather than, ““He hit my car”” (McCloud, 1993:38-39). He teaches us that our identities are “invested in many inanimate objects everyday” and goes on to show how crutches, knives and forks, telephones are all extensions of the body but part of the self (1993:38-39). McCloud argues that, “by de-emphasizing the *appearance* of the *physical* world in favor of the *idea* of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts” (1993:41). He notes that in cartoons, “inanimate objects may seem to possess *separate identities* so that if one *jumped up* and started *singing* it wouldn’t feel out of place./But in emphasizing the *concepts* of objects over their *physical appearance* much has to be omitted ” (1993:41); namely detail and even colour. As McCloud notes, “In black and white, the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language” (1993:192). I want to think about the political possibilities opened up by an animatedness, as Ngai describes it, which focuses on the idea of form, the realm of the concept, to see if I can glimpse “the transition from the image of a body whose parts are automatically moved, to the oppositional consciousness required for the making of political movements” (Ngai, 2005: 96), in “Bartleby” and *Skim*.

Bartleby the Animator

Although “Bartleby” is not represented in a visual medium, like the ones Ngai discusses in her thinking on animatedness, I want briefly to consider whether we as readers are asked to, as Scott McCloud says, deemphasize the form of Bartleby in favor of his concept. As mentioned above, Bartleby is a “motionless young man” whose figure is hard to make out. In his dead-wall day-dreams, we have no idea what he might be thinking. As McCloud says of comics, while they are visual, they are also very vague, giving the reader only clues to a larger picture (McCloud, 1993:86). Similarly, of Bartleby, Elizabeth Hardwick notes:

To return, what is Bartleby ‘thinking’ about when he is alone? It is part of the *perfect completeness* of his presentation of himself, although he does not present himself, that one would be foolhardy to give him thoughts. They would dishonor him. So Bartleby is not ‘thinking’ or experiencing or longing or remembering. All one can say is that he is the master of language, of perfect expressiveness. He is style (Hardwick, 2002:261).

Hardwick’s words suggest to me that, in fact, Bartleby is, ironically, for all of his passivity, animated much like a cartoon so that we focus on him as language, as style, as concept, rather than as content, for what is going on in

his head.

On a more concrete level of animatedness, many times we get the sense that Bartleby is not entirely in control of his responses, as though he were animated by an unseen force, or at least this is what the lawyer suggests: "'I prefer not to,' he replied in a flute-like tone. It seemed to me that, while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did" (Melville, 1952:15). The lawyer is convinced that Bartleby is commanded by forces unseen: "Poor fellow! Thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary" (1952:17). Moreover, his involuntariness seems to eerily infect the rest of the scribes and the lawyer himself. The lawyer is horrified to learn that "somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer'" (1952:27). Perhaps this frightens the lawyer and he attempts to think of Bartleby as an animated, if only barely, object: "Yes, Bartleby stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here" (1952:35). This statement is full of the lawyer's rationalizing optimism since we know that Bartleby is always there, that, in fact, is the central problem of the narrative. The problem of animatedness in "Bartleby" (as to whether or not Bartleby is animator, getting the office to speak in terms of preference, or is animated, as helpless office furniture) is captured by Ngai with her definition of animatedness. This definition holds that it "not only returns us to the connection between the emotive and the mechanistic but also commingles antithetical notions of physical agency" (Ngai, 2005:100). Richard Harter Fogle notes in his book, *Melville's Shorter Tales* (1960), that Bartleby's "isolation is projected in his quality of neutrality; Bartleby is a total nonconductor" (Fogle, 1960:19). And yet, he is a nonconductor precisely because these two types of animatedness are at odds in Bartleby. Because he is both animated and animating, on a net level he is balanced between two aspects of animatedness "the spontaneous with the formulaic, the unpremeditated with the predetermined" (Ngai 2005:100). Bartleby is both made to go gently and remains stubbornly.

Skim's Irony

Ngai remarks that, "the equivocality of the Bartlebyan aesthetic suggests that there is a special relationship between ugly feelings and irony, a rhetorical attitude with a decidedly affective dimension. . . . For the morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status of these feelings tends to produce an unpleasurable feeling *about* the feeling (a reflexive response taking the form

of ‘I feel ashamed about feeling envious’...) that significantly parallels the doubleness on which irony, as an evaluative stance hinging on a relationship between the said and the unsaid fundamentally depends” (Ngai, 2005:9-10). As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the girls’ self-love exercises, during which one girl wrote that unhappiness made her feel sad, the doubleness of ugly feelings opens up a space for irony. Like the amplification in “Joyful, Joyful,” the unpleasant feeling created about feeling is another amplification in which there is room for irony in the static of the feedback. Kim’s response to the song, however, is self-reflexive and points to the irony. The girl’s response in the exercise, on the other hand, is a simple reflex, a way of articulating feelings *less* well by deferring their definition onto other feelings.

I want to briefly consider whether the form of the graphic novel, which focuses on the realm of concepts, of form, rather than physical appearance, is in some ways ironic given that as Ngai notes: “Animation remains central to the production of the racially marked subject, *even* when his or her difference is signaled by the pathos of emotional suppression rather than by emotional excess” (Ngai, 2005:95) [Original emphasis]. As mentioned in the introduction, Ngai argues that the Americans stereotype Asians as being affectless, as being “like Bartleby, emotionally inscrutable” (2005:93). In her discussion of the television show *The PJ’s* (1998-2000), Ngai argues that, though the show was slammed for caricaturing African-Americans, really the show highlighted its own artifice (2005:104), and tried to move beyond the idea that racism is simply “bad representation” (2005:106). Ngai thinks that there is some power in animation. She argues that, “reanimation of the always already animated, racialized body ultimately pits a kind of material elasticity against the conceptual rigidity of racial stereotypes” (2005:124). Ngai also counters the “argument for rejecting animation entirely in the depiction of racially marked characters [which] hinges on a reference to the technique’s propensity for the grotesque” (2005:119). As McCloud notes, the graphic novel has the ability to animate the inanimate, so that dancing teacups, for example, would not be shocking. But *Skim* mediates a boundary between animation and affectlessness, which, as Ngai notes, is only one part of the scale of animation, the part to which the



Fig. 2. Lisa fades as Kim’s thoughts take over (*Skim* 71).

Asian subject is relegated. So the graphic novel *Skim* plays with the stereotype of emotional inscrutability of the Asian character by pointing to the form of emotions as concepts and reanimating them. When Kim is getting really annoyed with Lisa we see, in three successive panels, Lisa's face become less and less well defined, as Kim's thoughts take up more and more of the panel and become more lifelike than Lisa's face, animating Kim's ugly feelings of annoyance (Tamaki and Tamaki, 2008: 71) (Fig. 2).

Another example is the cluster of panels in which Kim tells us about feeling sick while singing "Joyful, Joyful." In these panels, we see her body brought into clear focus as the world around her recedes, and people and things around her are washed out in a way that gives the reader the sense of the emotional turn inward, animating what to others would be read as the inscrutable status of her emotions (2008:80). When Lisa asks Kim what is wrong, the panels view the girls from changing angles that evoke the sense of spiraling upward. Kim replies "nothing," then in her head thinks, "Something. Maybe nothing. Something" (2008:46) (Fig. 3).

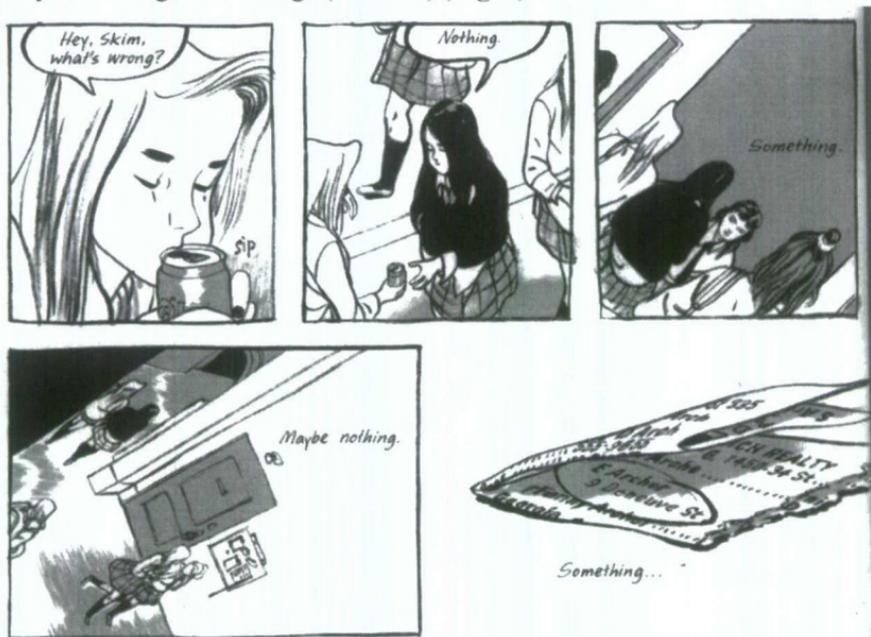


Fig. 3. Kim's world turns upside down (*Skim* 46).

Her conflicted and tumultuous feelings for Ms. Archer and her ugly feelings *about* her feelings for Ms. Archer are turning her world upside down. And the novel animates this feeling in an ironic way, which counters the cultural stereotype of the deanimated Asian character. Both "Bartleby" and *Skim* work to foreground depression in an animating way that is ironic. They reveal ways in which the depressive would ordinarily slip out of sight, perhaps

suggesting that we no longer need to spiral into ugly feelings about ugly feelings: “I am ashamed about feeling depressed” etc., by using the ironic gap of doubleness to close it.

Conclusion

My experiment in thinking back through Ngai to “Bartleby” and up through “Bartleby” to *Skim* doesn’t end with any concrete conclusions, only a sense that these texts, when braided together, illuminate each other in ways that are potentially productive for thinking about the politics of affectlessness. Certainly, however, these explorations have revealed to me, at least, the fruitfulness, and the fun, of cross-media comparisons, both at the stylistic and the substantive levels, that Ngai’s method employs.

Endnotes

¹ For clarity’s sake, I have chosen to separate Kim the character from *Skim* the graphic novel. Because the character prefers Kim to Skim, I have chosen to use that name. Although in some ways the title of the novel invites the reader to use Skim, however this is a topic that would deserve a lengthy discussion outside the scope of this paper.

² Please see pp. 8-9 for a discussion of the diagnostic possibilities of negative identifications in “Bartleby” and *Skim*. I wanted to foreground a comparison of “Bartleby” and *Skim* to start thinking about these two texts together and so had to leave a more detailed discussion of Ngai for later.

³ Leo Marx’s essay provides a typical example of this thinking: “The lawyer refuses to do anything further. But a few days later several excited persons, including his former landlord, confront him with the news that Bartleby not only continues to haunt the building, but that the whole structure of Wall Street society is in danger of being undermined. By this time Bartleby’s rebellion has taken on an explicitly revolutionary character” (Marx, 2002:248). Bartleby’s passive resistance is often seen as being revolutionary, but I think that Ngai best articulates *how* Bartleby is passively resisting by pointing to the diagnostic nature of his character and the disgust he engenders in the lawyer along with feelings of pity. See also Kingsley Widmer’s *The Ways of Nihilism: A Study of Herman Melville’s Short Novels* (1970), in particular chapter four, “Bartleby and Nihilistic Resistance.”

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Patti Luedecke is a first-year Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Western Ontario. She wrote her MA thesis in media studies at UWO, on the history of the technological pastoral in American culture and subsequent ecofeminist revisions of the garden. At the moment, her major topic of interest is food and its role in the pastoral in popular culture.



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